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William G. Hyland

A Formula for Baltic Independence

Both sides should revert to the 1939 status quo.

It is high time to turn from threats and accusations to a settlement of the Lithuanian crisis before Lithuania is strangled and civil war erupts. A compromise is still possible, but only if each of the major participants, including the United States, is willing to make significant concessions. The Kohl-Mitterrand proposal to freeze the implementation of Lithuanian independence goes too far and is too narrow in scope. A better starting point would be to settle the future of all three Baltic republics and to establish their longer-term relationship to the Soviet Union.

First, Mr. Gorbachev has to perform the most difficult task—to change his mind. He has to recognize that the confrontation is not a constitutional crisis. The simple truth is that the annexation of the three Baltic states was a criminal act of Stalin's of the same nature as the massacre of Katyn forest, which the Soviet government has now admitted after nearly 50 years. The Supreme Soviet votes of August 3-6, 1940 accepting the "demand" of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia to be annexed was as phony as the show trials of the 1930s. Surely Mr. Gorbachev knows that. A quick reading of the Soviet archives would reveal the truth. (Stalin's representative in Lithuania was one Vladimir G. Dekanozov, who everyone knows was Lavrenty Beria's aide, and who was tried and executed in December of 1953.)

Immediately after the annexation, thousands and thousands were deported to the Gulag (including Menachem Begin). This is why—even during World War II, when the United States and Great Britain had an interest in placating Stalin—they refused to recognize his brutal suppression of these three countries, even though Eastern Poland was conceded to the U.S.S.R.

Only one argument holds up after 50 years. After the fall of France in May of 1940, Stalin feared Hitler would turn eastward and attack Russia through the Baltic to Leningrad. The Soviets still have some legitimate security interests in this area, but those can easily be taken into account.

A settlement can be achieved by returning to the status quo ante. The three Baltic republics would be restored

to their independent status, simply by the Supreme Soviet repudiating the illegal vote of its predecessor of August 1940. This would end Mr. Gorbachev's constitutional crisis.

In this case, the Baltic republics would also have to make concessions. Instead of complaining about another Munich, they would be better advised to put forward a program that Gorbachev could regard as negotiable. They should offer to revert to the status of 1939, but would agree to the essence of the treaties of September-October 1939 with the Soviet Union that permitted a defined number of Soviet troops to be stationed in all three areas and gave the U.S.S.R. naval bases. Even though these treaties were negotiated under extreme duress and were unjust, they were accepted by the legitimate governments of the three republics. They are a basis for defining the Soviet role in the area. Their revival would also have the virtue of solving the major remaining territorial issue, i.e., the return of Vilnius to Lithuania was incorporated in the 1939 agreements.

This leaves the question of Soviet commercial access to the major Baltic ports. This should be conceded, but with details to be negotiated. Moreover, a corridor through Lithuania would also have to be conceded in order for the Soviets to reach Kaliningrad (Koenigsberg).

The three independent Baltic republics would declare their military neutrality, and this would be guaranteed by all members of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, in other words all of Europe and the United States.

And, finally, those Russian citizens and their families in the three republics, who were forced to move there, should have the opportunity to leave; the costs of moving could be defrayed by an international group, possibly the United Nations.

The Baltic republics should announce these concessions to take effect immediately upon the vote of the Supreme Soviet in Moscow nullifying the 1940 annexation.

The still leaves the most vexing issues; what of Gorbachev's fear of the impact on the other constituent repub-

lics of the Soviet Union? Will the freedom of the Baltic republics not unleash a new round of crises elsewhere in the U.S.S.R.? This is where the United States and other outside powers come in.

In August 1920, during the Soviet civil war, the United States took the position that sovereignty over the territory of the old Russian Empire should be protected during the period of revolutionary turmoil. This was set forth in a diplomatic note by the Secretary of State, Bainbridge Colby. It was subsequently set aside, however, when the United States recognized the independence of Finland and the Baltic countries. But it would not be a bad principle to apply in this new era of revolutionary turmoil.

In other words, after Baltic independence the United States would not challenge the territorial integrity of the Soviet Union or support secession movements, subject—and this is key—to the new constitutional provisions now in effect inside the U.S.S.R. and Mr. Gorbachev's prom-

ise to develop a new, more liberal federation. The principle of secession would remain, but the conditions would be decided by the new Soviet parliamentary bodies, which were elected in as free elections as we are likely to see in the Soviet Union.

This would be a major American concession and will be highly controversial, but it serves two American interests: freedom for the Baltic republics and a limit on the dangers arising out of the collapse of the Russian empire.

To sum up: the Baltic republics would be free, but Soviet troops would remain for some agreed interim; the Soviet Union would be reassured that its security would be protected, and the European powers and the United States would accept the U.S.S.R. as a legitimate union, subject to the laws of its elected legislature.

The writer, editor of Foreign Affairs magazine, is a former CIA official and was deputy national security adviser to President Ford.

